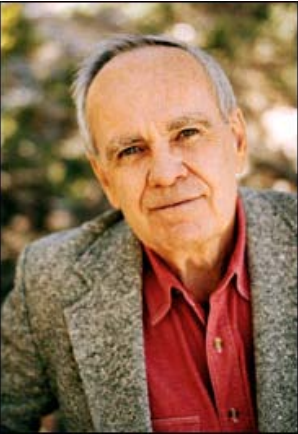


## 'No Country for Old Men': Texas Noir

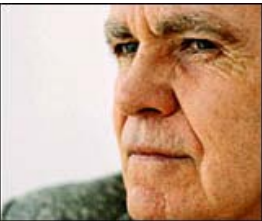
By WALTER KIRN  
Published: July 24, 2005

LIKE classic French cooking, the best American crime fiction relies on a limited number of simple ingredients (which may be why it's so popular in France). Too much temptation. Too little wisdom. Too many weak, bad men. Too few strong, good ones. And spread over everything, freedom. Freedom and space. The freedom (perhaps illusory) to make poor choices and the space (as real as the highways) to flee their consequences -- temporarily, at least. Corny and crude in the way of all great folk art, the intrinsically pessimistic crime novel -- as opposed to the basically optimistic detective novel -- is not about the workings of human justice but the dominion of inhuman time. As devised and refined by James M. Cain, Jim Thompson and their gloomy paperback peers, the crime novel aimed its cheap handgun at the heart of America's most prized beliefs about its destiny: that the loot we've scooped up will belong to us forever and that history allows clean getaways.



Derek Shapton  
Cormac McCarthy.

### Books



Cormac McCarthy's "No Country for Old Men" is as bracing a variation on these noir orthodoxies as any fan of the genre could expect, although his admirers may not be sure at first about quite how to take the book, which doesn't bend its genre or transcend it but determinedly straightens it back out. After the critical and popular triumphs of "All the Pretty Horses" and its sequels (known collectively as the Border Trilogy), the late-middle-aged McCarthy found himself so thoroughly trussed in garlands and draped in medals that it's a wonder he could breathe, let alone pick up his pen again. Hailed for having elevated the western from a pop amusement to a high-art form and designated as Hemingway and Faulkner's sole legitimate successor, he might have been wise to let his writing hand be removed at the wrist, embalmed and bronzed.

Instead, he decided to have some nasty fun and write like a fellow who was still alive, shedding the murky, grand German philosophizing that bogged down the last two installments of his trilogy for a sleeker, slimmer linguistic

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This retrospective includes reviews of the author's novels, an excerpt and a rare interview.

**NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN**

By Cormac McCarthy.  
309 pp. Alfred A. Knopf.  
\$24.95.

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of those who've stayed safely in their flower gardens. Satan exists, the world is getting worse, and God is too busy with other matters to care. He's written us off and moved on to fresh creations.

"She kept on, kept on. Finally told me, said: I dont like the way this country is headed. I want my granddaughter to be able to have an abortion. And I said well mam I dont think you got any worries about the way the country is headed. The way I see it goin I dont have much doubt but what she'll be able to have an abortion. I'm goin to say that not only will she be able to have an abortion, she'll be able to have you put to sleep. Which pretty much ended the conversation."

Bell's melancholy ride into the sunset is interrupted when Llewelyn Moss, a local man out hunting antelope, happens upon a briefcase stuffed with cash and casually flings his soul into the pit by bending over to pick it up rather than heading straight home to his wife, which is where men belong but find it hard to stay (the book's definition of original sin). The only question that remains is how long his gory punishment will take, and how many innocents will perish with him. McCarthy's snake-and-scorpion theology offers his characters no second chances, and it hints that their first chances never, in fact, existed. Moss scampers off with the dough because he must, and the gun-toting demons who chase him have no choice, either. The drug trade that yielded the money is also fated; a landslide of evil stirred by one kicked pebble that won't let up until the Second Coming. "It starts," Bell thinks, "when you begin to overlook bad manners. Any time you quit hearin Sir and Mam the end is pretty much in sight."

The "broken windows" theory of crime prevention has never been so drastically condensed. Is this countrified bleak fundamentalism a spoof? At times, the whole novel borders on caricature, so unremittingly hard-boiled that it threatens to turn to steam. The streamlined, barely punctuated sentences delineate the grisly action -- from running gun battles on small-town Main Streets to the agonized bandaging of bullet wounds in obscure motel rooms -- in the point-by-point manner of a technical manual, enumerating every muzzle blast and diagraming every ambush as though violence were a dry industrial process. The characters' states of mind rate little commentary and are completely dissolved in their behavior, which consists of fleeing and fighting and little else. The women involved are on hand to cower, grieve and plead for explanations of the mayhem that the men who've unleashed it decline to give them, partly out of old-school chivalry but mostly because they don't have any answers. All the men have is momentum and loaded weapons, which seem to fire of their own volition, since that's what loaded

manner and a darting movie-ready narrative that rips along like hell on wheels because it has no desire to break new ground, only to burn rubber on hard-packed old ground, thereby packing it down harder.

The compulsory drug deal gone wrong that drops the flag on this race with the devil takes place in the desert, in the West Texas jurisdiction of Sheriff Bell, an unreconstructed patriarchal geezer for whom aggressively enforcing the law is less important than passively keeping the peace. He's a watchdog, not an attack dog, content to doze until wrongdoers give him no option but to bite, which he does without breaking the skin, if possible. His drawling, cracker-barrel soliloquies overflow with crusty red-state sentiments that may or may not represent the author's feelings but probably don't violate them terribly. Bell, no public radio moral relativist, has walked over too much cactus in his lifetime to care about the tender sensibilities



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weapons like to do.

"It's a mess, aint it Sheriff?" Bell's deputy asks him. "If it aint it'll do till a mess gets here," Bell responds. McCarthy's dialogue is like this: every question sets up a one-two punch, and most of the sparring partners sound alike. Chigurh, the chief villain, throws the cleanest jabs. He's a strict, conscientious, self-taught psychopath who vigilantly maintains his mental ill health. He's purged himself of all qualms and second thoughts so as to function smoothly in the world that Bell, the Goldwaterian granddad, has grown unfit for. When in doubt -- and Chigurh rarely is -- he shoots someone point-blank or pierces his forehead with a pneumatic instrument designed for slaughtering cattle. He wears this tool strapped to his body like a prosthesis, and the story leaves no doubt that he'll prevail over beings who aren't so well equipped. Chigurh has achieved an evil state of grace that the ambivalent masses will never know.

Such sinister high hokum might be ridiculous if McCarthy didn't keep it moving faster than the reader can pause to think about it. He's a whiz with the joystick, a master-level gamer who changes screens and situations every few pages. The choreographed conflicts, set on a stage as big as Texas but as spiritually claustrophobic as a back-room cockfight ring, resolve themselves with a mechanistic certitude that satisfies the brain's brute love of pattern and bypasses its lofty emotional centers. Like Bell, we can only sit back and watch the horror, not wishfully influence its outcome. The clock has been wound, the key's been thrown away, and the round will not end until the hands reach midnight. The book leaves the feeling that we don't have long to wait.

*Walter Kirn is a regular contributor to the Book Review. His fourth novel, "Mission to America," will be published in October.*

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